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THE
INFLUENCE
OF
CONVERSATION,
WITH THE
Regulation thereof;
BEING A
SERMON
PREACH'D AT
St. Clement Dane,
TO A
Religious SOCIETY.

By *RICH. LUCAS, D.D.*

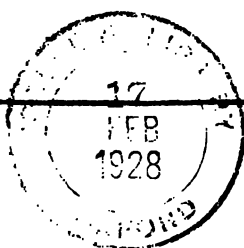
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The Influence of Conversation, with the Regulation thereof.

Prov. XIII. 20.

He that walketh with wise Men shall be wise ; but a Companion of Fools shall be destroyed.

CONVERSATION has ever justly been accounted a powerful Instrument of Good or Evil ; it has ever had a mighty Influence on the Conduct of Human Life ; and the Vice and Vertue of the World, has ever in a great measure been owing to it. The Regulation therefore of it did in all Ages demand the utmost Prudence and Caution, but surely in none more than in this of ours :

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all that fear the Lord
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of his Honour, for
their own Souls, and
for the giving a Check
propagating Holiness,
ous Generation; for ne
and confidence of Sin
daily; Atheism and
spread like a Leprosy;
thing in Example, no
course, that speaks us
we seem to have quite
the Morals, but the
the Gospel, and have
so far from the Mode
Sanctity and Dignity
Conversation, that the
Seriousness and Gravity

ie, than of vice. There are
reflections which determine me
is Subject. There is nothing
re in the Text; I am only to
you, that Wisdom and Good-
Folly and Sin, are Terms equi-
t in the Language of the Scrip-
and particularly of this Book
verbs; and that to make up
Antithesis or Opposition, be-
the two Parts of this Verse
and full, we must read it thus;
*he that keeps Company with the virtu-
d good, will himself be virtuous
appy: but he that keeps Company
be vicious, will be vicious and mi-*
. The Text then contains
two Propositions.

these Doctrines, and

III. Give you two of
our due Conduct in
ciety.

I. That Men are g
their Acquaintance and
This is affirm'd in my
with reference to good
Company: There is on
plain Reason for this;
naturally Lovers of the
therefore the most effe
endearing and obliging
is by mutual Respects
ances; No Man can ma
more effectually to anothe
falling in with him:

Natures ; this is that which renders Society agreeable, and Friendship lasting, which is never to be hop'd for, where Mens Principles and Humours are inconsistent and incompatible : E'er we can be pleas'd our selves, or please others, we must be mutually fashioned or moulded into an Agreement, and Conformity of Principles and Morals, we must be acted and govern'd by the same Affections and Inclinations, and mov'd and led by the same Desires and Passions. This is so far the universal Sense of Mankind, that it has escap'd no bodies observation ; All act and judge by this Rule ; we estimate Men by the Intimacies they maintain ; and he is thought to have forfeited all Pretension to good Sense or good Breeding, who does not stifle those Sentiments, and suppress those Inclinations which are apt to shock the Company he is in, or give any Disturbance or Disgust to his Friends. From hence the Proposition laid down follows with undeniable Evidence, *That Men are generally such as their Companions are* : For
that

that Society will soon be dissolv'd, where we reap no Satisfaction from it ; and we can reap none where there is no Agreement in our Notions and Inclinations.

But that this Truth, which is of the highest consequence, may be the more deeply imprinted, I will proceed to a more distinct and particular Illustration of it : And first of the Influence good Company has on us towards making us Wise and Good ; there are two things in Wise Men which never fail to work upon their Friends and Acquaintance : First, Good Discourse ; Secondly, Good Examples.

1. Then as to *Good Discourse* ; how manifest is the Tendency of this ? What Light, what Strength, what Pleasure does it minister ? How does it awaken the Conscience and purify the Heart ? How does it quicken us when we languish ? How does it recall and reduce us when we begin to forget our selves, and lay aside a wise Sobriety of Mind and Holy Fear ? How does it raise us
when

when we sink and grovel, and how often does it kindle in us wise Desires and holy Purposes? Thus *Solomon* observes, *That the Lips of the wise disperse knowledge*, Prov. 15. 7. and the *New Testament* tells us, concerning this kind of Discourse, that it *ministers grace to the hearer*; that it *edifies and builds us up in our holy Faith*: And the Disciples going to *Emaus* remark, what Life and Spirit there was in the Conversation of our Lord, *Did not our hearts burn within us while he talk'd to us on the way, and while he open'd to us the Scriptures*, Luke 24. 32. Now, tho' no Words can ever be impregnated with the same Force and Energy with which our Lord's were, yet certainly when God and our great Mediator, when the Riches of Divine Grace, when Righteousness and Heaven are the Subject of our Discourse, when our Language flows from the Heart, and is animated by a Vital and Experimental Sense of that we talk of, when it has all the Advantages which a true Friendship, and known Integrity, and the most

most favourable Opportunities can give it: Such Discourse can never fail of moving and affecting us.

2. From Discourse I pass on to Example; and here 'tis certain, that Vertue never appears so beautiful and lovely as in Action: That it is represented with much more Light in the practice of a wise and good Man, than it can be in Rules and Precepts; that the Notions we form of Duty from the Lives of others are generally more correct and just than those which we form even from the Scriptures themselves; for we are apt to bend and accommodate the Rule a little in favour of ourselves, but we never do so in favour of others. That the Excellencies and Perfections of a Friend, are very strong Incitements to Emulation, and very sensible Reproofs of our Remissness and comparative Barrenness and Unprofitableness; and on the other side his Defects are excellent Lessons of Caution and Watchfulness. 'Tis lastly certain, that whatever Beauty and Loveliness there be in Vertue, it receives a new Accession from
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the Example of my Friend, whose Integrity I know, and the Esteem and Affection I have for him is apt to beget in me a value for every thing he approves, and inclines me to be pleas'd with what he does. But these Arguments are too many and too copious to be dwelt on, I content my self therefore only to have mention'd them, and will lay before you but this one single Consideration: A good Life in a Companion is certainly a mighty Motive and Encouragement to us; for while we behold our Friends discharging the parts of good *Christians*, we see in them not only what we ought to do, but what we may do. Whatever is possible to them, is possible to us too; for they are clad with the same Frailties and Passions, expos'd to the same Temptations, and have no other Assistances than what we have, or may have. In them we have plain Demonstration of the Truth and Power of Religion; We can no longer imagine that Faith is a meer Speculation or Amusement, or Virtue a meer Pretence or Name; Under

der these Convictions we shall either come to a Resolution our selves to do our Duty, or shall suffer the daily Repoaches of our own Minds. This is the natural Influence of Example ; it Instructs, it Reproves, Exhorts, and if it doth not Prevail, it Condemns. Thus St. Paul, *Heb. 12. 1. Wherefore being compass'd about with such a cloud of Witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the Sin that does so easily beset us. And let us run with patience the race that is set before us.* Where the Apostle plainly teaches, that if the Faith and Patience of Martyrs and Confessors, do not move us to imitate their Vertues, they will certainly serve to upbraid and condemn us at the last Day ; and certainly the Examples of the Living, and those our Familiars and Friends, cannot but have as much Force and Power in them, as those of the Dead : Nay, much more for the Reasons I have already suggested. Will not our own Hearts be apt to reason thus with us, on every Reflection we make on the Vertues of our Friend ; What am I doing ? Can he and I go
to

to the same place at last ? he pursues a *Crown* by Works of Faith, and shall I obtain it by the Works of Darknes ? he seeks a *Heaven* by the labour of Love, and the patience of Hope ; and shall I gain it by Sloth and Idleness, by Sensuality and Loosness ? he mortifies the Body while I indulge it ; he prays and contends, and passes his Life in holy fear, while I am careless and unconcerned about a future state. His Conduct is regular, his Discourse heavenly, the bent of his Soul is towards that which is good ; but how little do I mind these things ? How hard is it for me not to let him see that I am wholly set upon the Pleasures and Profits of this World ? What do I mean ? am I indeed in the right, and he in the wrong ? is Religion indeed but a well devised Fable ? Alas ! I see the contrary. I see that there is Truth and Reason on his side ; I cannot but reverence him, and think him happy ; I cannot but own that he follows his Reason, I my Lust and Fancy. How uneasy these kind of Soliloquies must be, and how naturally they will end, either in reforming our Follies, or

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in breaking off and quitting a Conversation which gives us so much trouble, you cannot but see.

I have done with the *Influence of good Company*, I am next to consider *that of bad*. This Subject, after what I have in general said, does not require long insisting on. Daily Experience is too plain, too sad a proof of this Truth, That Sin is catching and Infectious: That Human Nature is so prone to Evil, that it needs very little Temptation or Incouragement to it: That ill Principles and Practises are soon propagated; and if they find any Countenance and Approbation from those we converse with, they will easily bear down all the Opposition which the Modesty of a Civil Education, the weak Impressions of Reputation or Decency, or the Checks of Natural Reason can raise against them; nay, Holiness it self, unless well grown, and deeply rooted, can scarcely resist the Contagion which ill Company spreads. *Can a Man (saith Solomon) take fire into his Bosom, and his Cloaths not be burnt? Prov. 6. 27. And evil Communication (saith St. Paul) corrupts good*

good Manners, 1 Cor. 15. but we shall be more sensible of the pernicious Effects of ill Company, if we consider these two or three Things.

1. Sin is the Cement of the Friendships and Intimacies of Sinners ; Vice is the Subject of their Conversation, and some Sensuality or other, makes up the Diversion and Entertainment of such Company. And how can it be otherwise ? *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh*, Matth 12. 32. What can the Mouth utter but Sin and Folly, when the Heart is full of Wantonness, Lust, Pride, Envy, Ambition, Sottishness, or Vanity ? what but polluted Streams can flow from a polluted Fountain ? what but Evil can an Evil Man bring forth out of the *evil Treasure of the Heart* ? Matth. 12. 35. how hard is it then even for a good Man to maintain the Charity and Dignity of his Mind, where Censures and Slanders, malicious Wit or Trifling and Impertinence, make up the Conversation ? How hard is it, even for such a one to preserve the Purity and Sobriety of his Mind ? where Riot and Luxury is the Business

B. 2.

they

they meet about ; where Pride and Ostentation of Life is the thing only admir'd ; and nothing has any favour in it, that is wise or good, devout or humble : And if a vertuous Person can in such Company scarce keep his Ground, how easily are those borne away by the Stream, who are of themselves but too prone to Evil, and too fond of Temptation.

2. Ill Company does naturally instil and propagate vicious Principles, worldly Maxims, sensual, carnal Improvements : Here we are furnished with Objections against God and Providence, with Excuses and Apologies for Sin ; here we learn to ridicule Religion and Conscience, and dispute ourselves out of all Sense and Duty. 'Tis of this sort of Communication *St. Paul* speaks, when he saith, *That it corrupts good manners.* And at this Day, those Errors which fret like a Canker and consume every thing that is wise and serious in us, have multiplied so beyond Measure, that they are no longer the enclosure of some few Pretenders to Freedom and Reason, but the foolishest and meanest, as well as the most

most vicious part of Mankind are deeply ting'd with them.

3. Ill Company creates Confidence in Sin; a custom of talking unconcernedly and loosely does naturally make way for carelessness and liberty in our Actions; and if we repeat either often, we shall soon grow bold and stupid in Sin; for if we neglect to make any Reflection upon our Words or Actions, we shall be insensibly betrayed into a hardness of Heart, or if (what is worse) we be driven by the Reproaches of our Conscience upon Reflection to take Sanctuary in the Cheats and Impostures, whether Vulgar or more refin'd, which Sinners are wont to put upon themselves, we shall soon sink into Prophaneness and Atheism. Having thus unfolded to you the Truth of the first Proposition, and shew'd you that Men become such as their Company, I am next to proceed to the

II. *That Happiness is the Fruit of Wisdom, and Misery of Folly.* Men may flatter themselves as they please, and delude themselves with vain words;

they may call the Proud and Rich happy ; they may admire the prosperous Sinner, and in a senseless Fit applaud themselves in their vicious Pleasures ; but they must bid defiance, not only to Revelation, but even Reason and Experience too, e'er they can promise themselves a true and lasting Satisfaction in any thing but Vertue. Revelation tells us plainly, *That Godliness, and that only, has the promises of the Life that now is, and of that which is to come, 1. Tim. 2. 8.* That if we sow to the flesh, we shall of the flesh reap corruption ; but if through the Spirit we mortifie the deeds of the body, we shall live, Gal. 6. 8. That we must all appear before the Judgment-seat of Christ, that we may receive according to what we have done in the body, whether it be good or evil, 2 Cor. 5. 10. and both Reason and Experience, as well as Revelation, tell us, That Sin is fruitless and dishonourable, Rom. 6. 21. *What fruit had ye then in those things whereof you are now ashamed ? That there is no peace to the wicked : That they are like a troubled Sea when it cannot rest, continually throwing up its*
own

own mire and dirt, Isa. 57. 20. That the Miseries and Calamities of Life spring from Sin; that Sin blasts our Enjoyments and Possessions; that it gives Sting and Edge to all our Miseries and Misfortunes: For if we did not dote upon the Body and the World, the Evils of Life could not wound us so deeply. In a word, Revelation, Reason, Experience assure us, that Righteousness fills the Mind with Peace and Joy; that Sin tortures it, with Contradictions and unreasonable Passions, with the Guilt and the Terrors of the Lord; and what think we must be the result of both in another World? *In the day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God*, Rom. 8 5. Must the nature of things be alter'd that the Sinner may be sav'd? Must Religion be an Imposture, that Madness and Folly may prove Wisdom? Must Reason be a meer Amusement, that Lust and Fancy may be infallible Guides? Must the Judgment of another World contradict all our Sense and Experience in this? That the little Railery and Sophistry of the Loose and Vicious
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III. To give you
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2. *We must endeavo
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selves with the wicked and vicious,
*Prov. 1. 14, 15. Enter not into the path
 of the wicked, and go not into the way of
 evil men; avoid it, pass not by it; turn
 from it and pass away. 2. Thess. 3. 6.*
*Now we command you Brethren, in the
 name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye
 withdraw your selves from every Brother
 that walks disorderly, and not after the
 tradition which he received of us. 1 Cor.*
*5. 11. But now I have written unto
 you not to keep Company. If a Man
 that is called a Brother, be a Fornicator,
 or Covetous, or an Idolater, or a Railer,
 or a Drunkard, or an Extortioner, with
 such a one, no not to eat. Nor do the
 Examples of Holy Men deviate in
 this point, from the Precepts and
 Exhortations of the Spirit. Psal. 26.*
*4, 5. I have not sate with vain persons,
 neither will I go in with dissemblers. I
 have hated the congregation of evil doers,
 and will not sit with the wicked. Psal.*
*119. 63. I am a companion of all them
 that keep thy Precepts. And thus it was
 with other good Men, they did equal-
 ly covet good, and shun evil Compā-
 ny. Thus Mal. 3. 16. when wicked-
 ness abounded, then they that feared the*
 Lord

Lord talk'd often one to another.
 in the first times of *Christianity*,
 was the Intimacy and Dea
 of the Disciples of Jesus one
 another ; great was their Abhor
 of all the Works of Darknes,
 all Communion and Fellowship
 those that practis'd them, as ma
 fily be inferr'd from *Acts 2.* an
 and other places of Holy Writ.
 Scripture then is plain in this p
 And from what I have said, it app
 that Reason is so too, unless we
 think that Wisdom and Folly, I
 piness and Misery, are things inc
 rent.

But here 'twill be objected
 this rate we shall soon find our s
 oblig'd to renounce the World,
 quit all Company. Is not our
 much the same with that which St.
 puts, *1 Cor. 5. 9, 10. I wrote unto*
in an Epistle, not to company with For
tors ; yet not altogether with the For
tors of the World, or with the Covet
Extortioners, or with Idolaters, for
must ye needs go out of the World ?
 this I answer.

(1.) Be it granted, as the Objection supposes, that we must keep ill Company or none ; in this case I affirm it is far better to keep none. Retirement is not so dreadful a thing to a Christian as some think ; the Calm and Peace of the Mind is much more desirable than Noise and Laughter ; and the Quiet and Regularity of Privacy much to be preferred before the Sensuality and Confusion of vicious Company ; nor need any one complain of the uncomfortableness of Solitude, who can converse when he pleases with Patriarchs, Prophets, and Apostles ; nay, with God and his Son Jesus. A good Man may meet God like *Isaac, in the Fields*, or *Moses in the Desert* ; he may enjoy Communion with him, like *David, in his Bed-chamber*, or *Joseph in the Dungeon*. The Promise, *John 12. 23.* is not limited to place ; *If a Man love me he will keep my words, and my Father will love him ; and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.* But on the other hand, in the Company of the wicked we shall never find God, nor ever feel any effects of his gracious Presence, but shall

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Understanding ; no Prov
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that which tends to Soft
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efs of God.

and see now and know, and seek in the broad streets thereof if ye can find a Man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth, &c. Nor need we yet pray with the Psalmist, *Psal. 12. 1. Help, O Lord, for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the Children of Men:* for the Servants of God are yet numerous; nor are they driven to their Secret Chambers, or to the Wilderness, or ashamed to own their Lord and Saviour, or to make an open Profession of the Hope that is in them.

I grant, will you say, that there are good Christians, but they are not easily, they are not every where to be found; but the Worshipers of Pleasure do every where swarm, every where haunt us. There is an easie Remedy for this: Do thy Duty with an humble and unaffected Confidence, with a steddy and unalterable Resolution: Put on the Garb of a Disciple; let the Air of a Christian appear in every thing that thou doest, or sayest; let the brightness and beauty of Holiness, that enriches and adorns the Soul, break forth ever and anon in thy

Christians; and of the *rest*
man join himself unto them, A
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the World, and this draws
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Rule is to be extended no farther than to Intimacies and Familiarities, to voluntary and chosen Acquaintance, not to Accidental Meetings or Occasional Correspondencies. But we must take care not to be too favourable and compliant in this Matter; the more Sin abounds, the less Discipline is or can be exercised; the more zealous should we be in particular to do honour to Religion, and to fix a Mark of Shame and Infamy upon Vice. Never would this Rule be more scandalously transgress'd, than if Priests and Prelates should court the Company and Favour of Atheists and Adulterers: Or Matrons and Virgins that of a wretched Woman, whose State and Port is not more notorious than the Shame and Lewdness that maintains it. How can our Wives or Daughters think that there is any Shame or Turpitude in the Sin, when we pay so much respect to the Sinner?

2. We must consider what ought to be the true End and Design of Society and Conversation among Christians. Certainly that Man has a very

mean and low Notion of Friendship, who proposes no other End than to Eat and to Drink together, or to laugh and fool away our precious Moments. The Scripture points out to us much nobler Purposes and Designs of Conversation, when it tells us, That our Speech should be such *as may administer Grace*; that we should *build up one another in our holy Faith*; that we should *comfort one another, exhort one another continually*, and so much the more, because *the day approaches*, &c. and surely we are strangely mistaken, if we think that our Communication will lose all gust by being directed to one of these ends. On the contrary, it would doubtless be as much more delightful as beneficial, if when we meet we were accustomed, instead of Censures and Reflections, News and Impertinence, or Frothiness and Lightness, to discourse of some worthy and noble Subject, becoming the Genius and Hope of a Christian. The Example of *David* confirms this Notion; he try'd and found that Friendship was both useful and pleasant, whilst it was maintain'd on the stock
of

of Religion ; *My Companion, my Guide, my familiar Friend* ; we took sweet Counsel together, and walked into the House of God in company, Psal. 55. 14, 15.

To this it will be again objected, It will be very difficult at all times to find Matter and Occasion for good Discourse. I answer; *First*, I do not utterly and totally exclude the common Accidents of Life, the Business and Affairs of it, nay, even Things of a pleasant and divertive Nature, if modest and inoffensive, from being sometimes the Subject of Conversation ; but, I say, Religion ought to be the main and great End of it. *Secondly*, 'Tis hard for me to conceive how a good Christian should often want either Matter or Opportunity for pious Discourse. As for Matter; he must suffer the Providences of God to pass without any observation or remark; he must be a Stranger to the Works of Nature; he must be utterly unread in the History of Human Affairs ; he must be unacquainted with the Book of God; and he must have little experience of the Power and Operation of God's Word and Spirit upon his own

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thing but Ignorance or Affectation could make a Man so impertinent, as to talk of any thing that were pious and good. I beseech you to consider whether this be not a very near approach to the being ashamed of Christ; and if it be, how shall we escape that dreadful Sentence which is denounced against it, *Mark 8. 38. Whosoever shall be ashamed of me, and of my words, in this wicked and adulterous Generation, of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy Angels.* This Minds me of the

3d, And last Direction, which is, *That we must be thoroughly persuaded that the right conduct of our selves, in the point of Society, is a Matter of the highest moment and importance.* Does not the Scripture plainly suggest this, when our Saviour tells us, *Math. 12. That by our Words we shall be justified, and by our Words we shall be condemned.* And St. James tells us, *James 3. 2.*
If

If any Man offend not in Word, the same is a perfect Man. And 'tis no wonder the Scripture lays so great a stress, or sets so great a value on the due government of the Tongue, since nothing tends more to the pleasing of God, to the honour and interest of Religion, and to the forming the Morals of Men. As to this latter, the forming every Man's particular Manners, I have said enough: One thing here I will only remark; never was there a more illustrious Proof of the Efficacy of Religious Conversation than in the Primitive Times. Next to that of the Spirit of God it self the Christians found no greater Support under all their Trials, than what they derived from their mutual Incouragements and Exhortations of one another. And I do not question, but that Religious Friendship would be as useful now to preserve us against the Snares and Pleasures of Sin, as it was then to uphold them under their fiery Trials and Afflictions, were
our

our Discourses now actuated by the same Spirit theirs were then. As to the pleasing God; must not God, think you, be as well pleas'd with our talking of, and magnifying his wondrous Works in our familiar Conversations with one another, as with our praising or extolling him in our Closets? and must not the regard and reverence which we testify for him in Company, be as acceptable to him as our private Adorations? spring they not from the same Principle, and is not the one as subservient (to say no more) to his Glory, as the other? As to the Honour and Interest of Religion, nothing can more effectually promote it than the giving a frequent and publick Testimony of our Value for it. Which way can we more clearly convince the World of the Excellence and Vertue of it? Which way can we more effectually propagate in one another the Love of it, than by making it appear that it has moulded and form'd our Souls

Souls into the Image of God ; that it has possessed our Thoughts, and refin'd our Conversation ? But on the other Hand, if we have no regard to our Talk, if we think this a Matter which Conscience is not concern'd in, we shall soon see Religion daily lose ground ; for we shall soon learn to think and act with the same liberty we talk ; and this will introduce a strange face of things in a little time.

Now to close all, If our care or unconcernment in this point, be of this vast Consequence, we cannot but think we shall be called to a strict account about it in another World ; the Day is coming when the Lord will fulfil his promise, *Mal. 3. And the Lord harkened and heard, and a Book of remembrance was written, and they shall be mine, saith the Lord, in that Day when I make up my Jewels.* The Day is coming when God will execute the Threat denounced in the Apostle Jude, *Behold the Lord*

(35)

Lord cometh with ten Thousand of
his Saints, to execute judgment upon
all, to convince them that are ungodly a-
mong us, of all their ungodly deeds
which they have ungodlily committed;
and of all their hard speeches which
ungodly sinners have spoken against
him.

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